

# ***Toward A Sustainable Future***

Cambridge Growth Policy

UPDATE 2007

## **LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE**





*An important component of all redevelopment projects in Cambridge has been the creation of pleasant open space systems.*

## Looking Toward the Future

---

As City staff and the Planning Board update the 1993 growth policy document, it is striking how relevant the policies have remained; we expect they will also be useful in dealing with likely future adaptations that the community may experience. As the city moves forward, it is worth revisiting the chapter in *Toward a Sustainable Cambridge* entitled “A Vision for Cambridge.” In that chapter, the vision for Cambridge is described as “conserving, respecting the past, while not suggesting that land uses in Cambridge remain frozen or static. It builds on the recognition that Cambridge works and human diversity works. The current mix of urban form, scale, density, and mix of uses is worth sustaining and enhancing, both in existing neighborhoods and commercial districts, and in the older industrial areas.” Surely that broad vision remains worthy today, as do the series of descriptive phrases that accompanied it:

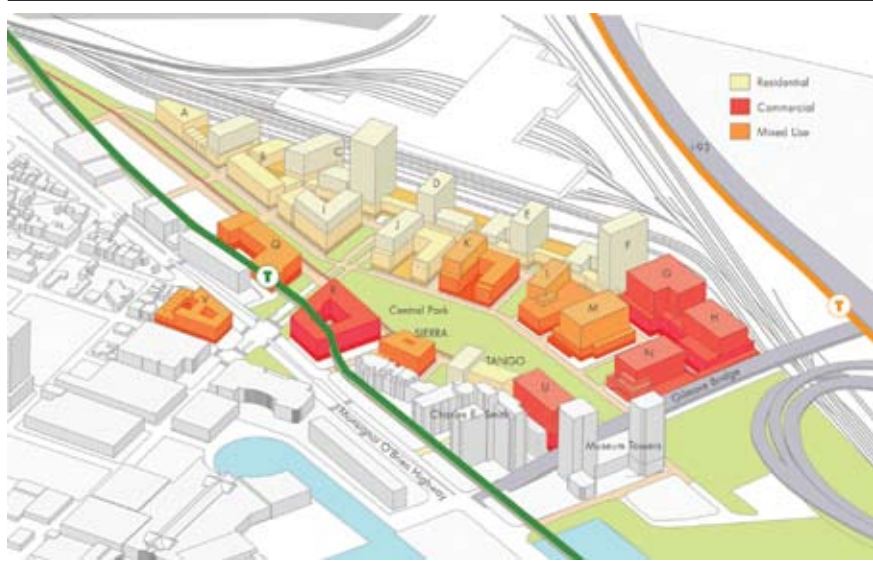
- A vibrant, stable population with people of diverse backgrounds.
- An environment where families can thrive.
- Good housing available to a wide spectrum of people.
- Significantly reduced auto traffic.
- A national model for environmental responsibility.
- A system of beautiful, well-maintained, and accessible parklands.
- A renowned system for training workers.
- A thriving economic base.
- Vital and distinctive retail centers.
- Strengthened and stabilized neighborhoods which retain their distinctive flavor.
- A model for effective citywide design review.
- A system of comprehensive, high quality city services.
- An ongoing, successful process for addressing growth and development concerns.

From the village of the 1600s where Harvard Square now stands, to the emergence of the village near Lechmere Square in the 1800s, to the early reuse of industrial areas in the late 1900s, to the ongoing transformation of the former rail yards in North Point into a vibrant mixed use neighborhood, the city continues to be a special place with a complex urban structure. There are many positive aspects to that history that will help the city in its future growth.

Certainly, economic adaptability itself is an important attribute. Not so long ago, it did not seem likely that Cambridge would succeed in its revitalization. In the late 1970s, for example, banks were unwilling to give loans for the expansion of an East Cambridge hotel, because it seemed like a bad investment. Unemploy-



The drawing at the top shows how the North Point area is envisioned to be developed in the coming years. The aerial photo in the middle shows the first residential projects under construction. The montage at the bottom gives an idea of how the entire area will look once all the parts of the project have been built. (Images courtesy of Jones Lang LaSalle)



ment was high, and plans like the East Cambridge Riverfront Plan were skeptically viewed as exercises in unrealistic optimism. Now, a new district thrives there, with a mix of new buildings and many older industrial structures reused for housing or business use. Change has continued beyond the 1980s development experience, as the communications and software industries that then dominated have been largely supplanted by life sciences enterprises.

Another essential characteristic of Cambridge is its diversity, not only in its businesses and institutions, but also in its housing types and, most importantly, the many kinds of people who live here. Partly as a result of the housing incentives in the recent citywide rezoning and partly because the market for housing has been very strong, thousands of new dwelling units, with a required affordable component, have been added to the city's housing stock, mostly in relatively dense structures in former industrial districts. For the first time in decades, there is a modest rise in population even as households become smaller, and as more of these projects come to fruition, the increase is likely to continue. The former industrial districts that were depressed in the 1970s are seeing new life. This new housing phenomenon is complemented by the stability of the long-established neighborhoods, which have become ever more desirable as places to live.

## The Challenges Ahead

---

Cities are ever evolving places, both incubators of change and reflections of broader forces around them. As we look out to a longer planning horizon, say 20 to 50 years, what kinds of trends, issues, and factors may be of consequence to future growth policies?

In this last section we begin to suggest some of the trends that are likely to influence the planning challenges of the future.

1. Demographics indicate that the city's population is getting older, families smaller and with fewer children. Income inequality appears to be growing. How will changing demographics impact the physical environment, the demand for city services, needed public investment, our sense of community and social cohesion?
2. We have lived through two recent development booms, in the 1980s and again in the late 1990's/early 2000's. If the city wants to continue to evolve, we may face some difficult choices, such as allowing higher levels of density or more "tear downs" to make room for new development, or, alternatively, adopting a low-growth scenario.
3. The last 10 to 15 years have seen the explosion of the Internet revolution. What impact will the world wide web and other communications technologies have on the retail sector? The city's educational institutions? Business in general? As more communication takes place via technology and not face to face, what will that mean to our sense of place and to the vitality of the city as a place to work, study, shop and play?

4. Today, the biotechnology sector (along with education and governmental services) is a backbone of the local economy. How will increasing competition, both national and international, affect the health of our business climate, the number of local jobs, tax revenues, the uniqueness of our educational and labor assets?
5. The city is beginning to change physically. Over the last decade, we have begun to see a somewhat more vertical city, with more high-rise apartments and condominiums. What impact, if any, will these physical forms have on civic life? How will these new communities be woven together with the city's more traditional neighborhoods?
6. The demand for housing that is affordable to regular working families and individuals is not likely to abate. In addition, Cambridge is an old city with a large inventory of infrastructure services needing modernization. Will the financial resources, particularly from the federal and state government, be there to support the city's affordable housing, workforce development, modernization efforts and other programs? Without those efforts, what will happen to the city's economic diversity?
7. As Harvard University builds out its property in the Allston neighborhood of Boston, how will the city of Cambridge be affected? Will the university's center of gravity shift away from Cambridge? What will happen to any vacated properties on this side of the river? How will Harvard's need to move students, faculty and workers across the river impact traffic on Cambridge streets and in our neighborhoods? What impact will Harvard's new presence in Boston have on regional transportation investment?
8. Patterns of transportation will continue to be central to the quality of life in the city. It will be a continual challenge to get people out of their single occupancy vehicles, particularly those moving to the outer suburbs, and onto public transit as well as walking and biking. Will our ability to innovate keep pace with the environmental and quality of life challenges posed by the automobile? Will those living elsewhere in the state share our enthusiasm for meeting that challenge?

A continuing willingness to look at what is essential to conserve in the community, balanced by a desire to be relevant to current society and a willingness to accept change, will help Cambridge move positively into the future. These growth policies will be tested, and another retrospective and reevaluation should be worthwhile in another ten years or so.